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ABSTRACT

Behaviorists define the purpose of educational psychology as that of teaching teachers to predict, control, and modify classroom behavior. This conceptualization is contrasted with the approach which views educational psychology as a comprehensive content area emphasizing information rather than skills. A basic distinction between behaviorists and nonbehaviorists can be traced back to the question of whether the role of education and teachers is to instruct and teach skills (behaviorist view), or to be concerned with the development of interpersonal relationships and positive self-concepts (nonbehaviorist view). Much criticism voiced against the behaviorist approach is based on misinformation. Some misconceptions are: (a) that behaviorist approaches are designed for dealing only with deviant behavior; (b) that we cannot discover specific types of teacher behaviors that will lead to certain student outcomes; and (c) that behaviorists teach only Skinnerian and operant procedures. Misconceptions also exist concerning educational psychology courses. Such courses should avoid subject areas which will not aid in facilitating behavioral change. Rather than trying to cover everything, teachers should concentrate on teaching skills students will need later as teachers. (PB)

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A Behavioral Approach in Defining and Teaching Educational Psychology

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Behaviorists have very specific definitions of educational psychology. Education is defined as both the teaching and learning of new behaviors. Psychology is defined as the science of human behavior that includes the principles and procedures which facilitate desired behavioral changes.

The behaviorist defines the purpose of educational psychology as that of teaching teachers to predict, control and modify behavior in the classroom. The function of educational psychology then is to provide the teacher with the necessary skills to accomplish these tasks in his own classroom. Educational psychology is therefore conceptualized as a set of competencies to be taught each teacher. This conceptualization is contrasted with the approach which views educational psychology as a comprehensive content area and which emphasizes information rather than skills.

The function of the educational psychologist is to provide the teacher with the necessary skills to accomplish these tasks in his or her own classroom. In contrast to the cognitivists who often view educational psychology as a given body of knowledge (e.g., various cognitive theories) to be taught and often refrain from direct classroom application, the behaviorists first search for teacher behaviors which are causally related to desired student outcomes. This approach leads to a set of competencies which include skills in designing and implementing reinforcement schedules and in developing student performance measures.

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Emphasis on Data and Goals

A behavioral orientation is concerned with developing a more systematic approach to designing instruction and in actually teaching. There is a greater emphasis on having teachers keep up to date records on all aspects of a student's behavior. This emphasis on collecting empirical data and using this data for making decisions, contrasts sharply with those approaches that rely heavily upon a teacher's subjective interpretation of classroom activities. If educational psychology is a science, then decisions made within the area must be based on real data and not unsubstantiated constructs or other forms of psychological fantasy.

As Popham (1969) pointed out, behaviorists tend toward goal-referenced instructional models. The concern with a goal-referenced model is the attainment of pre-specified objectives. In fact, the sole criterion of whether or not instruction is effective is based on whether or not students are able to demonstrate pre-specified skills or behaviors. Others tend more toward means-referenced models. They are concerned with what techniques the instructor used or what experiences the students were exposed to. The problem with the means-referenced model is its total emphasis on teacher behavior with very little emphasis on student behavior. There is nothing wrong with recommending various methods and approaches if you can demonstrate with hard data their usefulness in having students achieve stated goals.

All education is concerned with behavior change. The major role of the teacher should be that of an effective behavior changer. Whether we admit it or not, this is precisely what most educators do.

Non-Behavioral Approaches

Other approaches seem to concentrate on describing the person. They do not appear to be concerned with instruction in the classroom. In fact, their greatest concern seems to revolve around child development. There is nothing wrong with courses dealing with child development if they are so labeled. A course dealing with educational psychology should not simply be an expanded course on child development. Whether or not little Harry had toilet training problems will in no way help a prospective teacher design an instructional unit to help Harry in the classroom.

This total emphasis on the person often leads to a greater concern for the affective domain rather than the cognitive or psychomotor. Among many educational psychologists there is a great concern for having students develop positive self-concepts and positive attitudes toward other students. Behaviorists, on the other hand, seem to place much greater emphasis on the cognitive and psychomotor domains. This very basic distinction often found between behaviorists and non-believers can be traced back to a psychologist's view of education. Is the role of education and teachers to instruct and teach skills or should the primary concern be the development of interpersonal relationships and positive self-concepts? Behaviorists do not exclude self-concept and social skills, most deal with these areas. Behaviorists often view self-concept as being directly related to a student's level of competence. If you teach teachers how to instruct their students so that the students are competent, these competent students will develop positive attitudes. Many non-behaviorists believe that first you must develop the positive attitudes before a student can learn and they view educational psychology as a crash course to turn out junior classroom therapists and group leaders.

These same theorists often talk about teaching children to problem-solve. They talk about the importances of the child's perceptions, his viewpoint and interpretation of the world around him. Somehow, through a miraculous transformation students will turn a series of experiences into an ability to problem-solve. By talking about a complex skill like problem-solving, they seem to give some credibility to their pseudo-scientific approach to teaching and learning. Behaviorists also see problem-solving behavior as a skill all teachers should be concerned with. In most hierarchies of learning, problem-solving is listed at or next to the most complex learning level. What many non-behaviorists fail to recognize is the fact that teachers need to be able to structure the learning environment so that students can learn those skills and behaviors necessary for working at a problem-solving level.

Teachers themselves are often supportive of a non-behavioral approach, preferring what is sometimes called a more "humanistic" orientation. Teachers prefer to talk about developing self-concepts and teaching children to problem-solve because these constructs sound impressive and important. Unfortunately, they fail to recognize that students need to develop basic pre-requisite skills before being problem-solvers. There is a reluctance on the part of teachers to talk about memorizing the alphabet or the learning of basic math skills. These skills require hard work on the part of the student and the teacher.

Whether non-behaviorists want to face reality or not is debatable. School learning is not fun--it is hard work. You can make the environment less aversive and you can be supportive to the students. However, eventually the students and the teacher are going to have to do some work if learning is to take place.

Some Misconceptions About a Behavioral Approach

Many of the criticisms voiced against a behavioral approach are based on mis-information and a distorted view of the types of behaviors to be dealt with. One of the most common mis-conceptions is the notion that behavioral approaches are designed for dealing only with deviant behavior. This is simply not true. Instructional programs which are behaviorally oriented have as their primary goal the changing of academic behaviors. The purpose of a behavioral approach is to take a teacher and teach him the skills he will need to improve and change academic behavior in the classroom.

A second criticism often heard is that we can never discover the specific types of teacher behaviors that will lead to certain student outcomes. In other words, we shall never identify cause-effect relationships in an instructional setting. Most behaviorists would agree that we have a long way to go before we can predict behavior with a high degree of accuracy. There is a great need for more research in the area of instructional design. Before we can conduct the research, however, we need to be able to define the variables we wish to measure and clearly state the goals we are trying to achieve. At least behaviorists are taking this first step in defining variables and constructs.

Another objection often heard is that behaviorists have a narrow view of the area and teach only Skinner and operant procedures. This is also false. There is nothing wrong with teaching cognitive theory and discovery learning techniques in a class. The only objection is the acceptance of such theories and procedures without looking at the empirical data indicating whether or not the theory or procedure is successful in changing a student's behavior.

Content Vs. Performance

Stuart Cohen presented a paper at the A.P.A. convertion in 1972 dealing with 'Myths about Educational Psychology". Below are paraphrased two of these myths which clearly point out some sharp distinctions between a behavioral orientation and a more traditional approach to a course in educational psychology.

The first myth is "To know is to do good." Cohen points out that this is completely false. There is no research in any area that demonstrates people who know about theories actually use this knowledge. In fact, when a person's behavior is recorded it often runs contrary to his stated theoretical position and knowledge. Research quoted by Popham (1969) has clearly demonstrated that experienced teachers (who have supposedly learned something about teaching) are no better at bringing about changes in student performances that are nonexperienced people.

Cohen argues that we must shift our emphasis from content to performance. Educational psychology, like many areas within higher education, is organized and taught on a topic outline basis. In other words, textbook headings or a similar topic list is used to arrange content that is then labeled as a course in educational psychology. The problem with this approach is that the identification of areas of knowledge and information is not sufficient for the development of a student's problem solving behavior. The traditional organization based on areas of knowledge is sufficient only for the acquisition of verbal information which is the lowest level cognitive skill.

In the traditional course in educational psychology students spend most of their time learning about things instead of developing skills so they can do things. The course is usually organized around the content to be

covered. Often the content to be covered is a decision made by people who have nothing to do with the actual teaching of the course. For example, many professors instead of specifying the content area, allow one of the publishing companies to do it for them. The course is based on a text book. Even the tests used are developed by the author of the text. The use or non-use of a text is not really an issue. If the text teaches the skills necessary in the course then its use is justified. If the text provides simply an overview or survey of content areas then its value is highly questionable.

If educational psychology is to develop and be a science we must make a complete change in our approach to defining the area. We need to determine the skills most of our students will require when they are out teaching. Courses should then be developed to teach these skills and the content should be based on concepts and information necessary for the demonstration by the student of the skills identified. Educational psychology should not be a history course. The purpose of the course should not be to teach about people or concepts unless it can be demonstrated this information is critical in modifying student behavior.

A second myth is that "The good teacher is a junior educational psychologist". I completely agree with Cohen on this point. We seem to be totally confused about the amount and degree of knowledge a student should gain from a single course in educational psychology. We can't expect an undergraduate student to learn everything in a one semester course that it takes a Ph.D. three to five years to learn. By trying to teach everything or a little bit of everything we make the course a survey of psychology with very little in-depth useful information provided to the student. This approach often leads to a duplication of Psychology 101 being taught under a different label.

Practical Applications

Instead of trying to teach everything we need to identify those critical skills every teacher should have and teach these. At least a student in a course emphasizing a manageable number of skills and concepts could be given practice opportunities to demonstrate these skills before we turn him or her loose on our children.

Identifying skills that teachers need to develop is not as complex a task as some may think. There are two simple ways to do this. First, ask teachers what skills they need to know to be effective at changing student behavior and managing a classroom. Second, go out and observe a wide variety of classroom situations identifying the skills most frequently required by a teacher. During these observation sessions the skills teachers are lacking may also be identified.

A behavioral approach would also deal with a major concern of students in educational psychology courses--the lack of meaningful and relevant information. By emphasizing practical skills the course itself can be made relevant and meaningful. Related to the problem of making the course meaningful is the problem of instruction within an educational psychology course. There is a tendency to talk about things instead of actually doing them. We tell our students to individualize instruction while we ourselves lecture and use norm-reference evaluation models. In a course that deals with teaching teachers, various models that are dealt with in the course should be used. We should not lecture about programmed instruction or mastery learning, instead, a student should learn the technology by being taught by the particular mode of instruction. This gets you beyong the verbal information level to a level of application.

The ideal situation for a behaviorist is a field-based course where the student would be required to learn and demonstrate necessary skills in a real classroom. In a field-based situation what is relevant and what is not become clearer to both teacher and student.

Summary

A behavioral approach places an emphasis on the learning of skills necessary to facilitate behavior change in the classroom. Behaviorists would prefer a field-based course in which student-teachers could actually motivate and reinforce children. Content is considered important only when it aids in the facilitating of behavioral change. Decisions regarding skills and content in the course on educational psychology must be based on empirical data supporting these skills or content in facilitating changes in student behavior.

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